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Fear, William J. How to do academic reading. [Teaching Resource]
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READING

Any degree course involves some reading. The Masters courses are usually based on skill development, including cognitive and personal skills, and reading. Reading typically leads to knowledge acquisition and a grasp of the language, constructs, and evidence base used in the discipline.

The level of reading undertaken by students typically has a direct relationship to levels of achievement. **The greater the level and volume of appropriate reading the higher the level of achievement.** The reading is usually split into three different categories:

1) **Core reading.** This is the reading directly related to one or more aspects of the course covered in the Subject Guide/lectures/discussion groups. This core reading forms a **foundation of knowledge** with regard to a particular argument or debate or trend within the discipline and the wider world (e.g. in the work place and among management and so on). **A grasp of the core material is considered essential for the passing the course** and it is the basis for the arguments and discussions and debates taking place. (NOTE: The **core reading often contains articles that present two sides of the argument.** That is, it often contains material that seems to contradictory. It is important to recognise that there is a debate, an argument for both sides.)

2) **Additional reading.** This is usually listed and consists of **wider reading about the topic or subject** and often contains additional arguments, specific studies, case studies in the literature, studies that are taken as evidence, and so on. The additional reading both **reinforces the core reading and presents alternative points of view.** The point of the core reading is to help you broaden and deepen your understanding.

3) **Independent reading.** Through searching the library and following up references **high performing students develop their independent reading skills.** This is a core skill acquired during a Master's degree and one that is sometimes neglected. Generally speaking students should be able to grasp and argument from the core material and then be able to **independently find additional material that either supports or refutes those arguments.**

In special cases strong students are able to find **novel arguments** and/or develop novel arguments. This is the hallmark of a first class student.

In addition to these three standard categories of reading we sometimes present what is called ‘pre-reading’. **Pre-reading is reading that is recommended either before starting the course or before a lecture or discussion group.** In this sense there is always pre-reading as there is far **greater benefit from being prepared than there is from trying to catch up.** Under ideal conditions all students should be pre-reading and be ahead with their core reading. That way they come into lectures, discussions, and so on fully prepared and ready to develop arguments and listen critically to the material being presented.

It is important **that students take responsibility for their own reading.** There is nothing anybody else can do to ensure students read the core material, do at least some pre-reading, and so on. This is the students’ responsibility.

Sometimes students ask **how much reading is expected.** Hopefully the above goes some way towards answering that question. To recap, **the core reading is considered essential to the course and the very minimum that needs to be read. Additional reading helps expand the ideas, arguments and use of constructs, theories and so on. Independent reading helps develop novel understandings and approaches.**

The amount of time students put into reading varies and depends on circumstances. However, it is better to read for a set amount of time every day than to try and cram all the reading into one sitting. The exception to this is to do some pre-reading by skimming the core material. **The way students read also varies and depends on personal style.** Some people prefer to read a small amount of material in depth and to become extremely familiar with that material (e.g. the core reading). Others prefer to read widely and piece together their understanding from a range of sources. **Each student needs to work out what works best for them, BUT do NOT neglect the core reading.** One ‘trick’ with reading is to set an amount of material to read in a set amount of time. Say, for example, two papers in one hour. This will set limits on the amount of time you spend reading any one piece of material and this will in turn develop your reading skills as you learn to look for key parts of the paper – arguments, methods, evidence, and so on.

To conclude, **reading is the foundation of your study.** You will need to set aside an amount of time to read every week, and preferably every day. **The better the quality of your reading the greater the benefit you will gain from the course.**

Finally, **the discussion groups present you with the opportunity to bring your reading to life, to test your arguments, and to develop essential skills.** This is where you can expand your ideas and work with your peers to better develop your knowledge and understanding of the core material and the wider arguments. In addition, the special nature of this course means that most, if not all, students are already working in a related professional capacity and therefore the discussion forums provide an unprecedented opportunity for networking and allow students to build their own community.